

Governance at a Glance, Issue 10: September 2021

2021 QUARTER THREE IN REVIEW

An Exploration of the Complexities and Challenges Faced in Health, Education, and Migration Governance in Nepal

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What is the current status of Health, Education, and Migration governance? How are governance systems organized, what progress have we made, and what changes can be expected in the coming future?

Our 'Governance at a Glance' series explores these questions from a lens of key thematic areas that have or have the potential to characterize Nepal's overall development and affect governance systems. The pages enclosed in this report represent a summary of the status of key developments from the third quarter of 2021 in Nepal. To be more specific, the months of July, August, and September are within the scope of this publication. These developments are explored through an assortment of key indicators, trend analyses, official government communications, and brief discussions of likely challenges that will be faced by relevant stakeholders in each of our three areas of focus.

About GMC Nepal

Governance Monitoring Centre Nepal is a research initiative by Kathmandu-based NGO Centre for Social Change. Using a variety of investigative methods and the latest in qualitative & quantitative research tools, GMC Nepal is dedicated to strengthen Nepali democracy and empower its citizens through accurate & up-to-date information.

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Glossary of Abbreviations

Certain commonly used shorthand abbreviations are used through the pages enclosed in this document to represent names of specific organizations, projects, studies, statistical composites, and/or governmental & non-governmental bodies for brevity.

They are listed below in their order of appearance in this report:

GoN	Government of Nepal
2021 Q1	First Quarter (January, February, March) of the year 2021 CE
2021 Q2	Second Quarter (April, May, June) of the year 2021 CE
2021 Q3	Third Quarter (July, August, September) of the year 2021 CE
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
Covid-19	Novel Corona Virus Disease, Discovered in 2019
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
SME	Small and Medium Sized Enterprises
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
MoHP	Ministry of Health and Population
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
UN	United Nations
NHP	National Health Policy
NHSS	Nepal Health Sector Strategy of 2015-2020
NSRU	National Strategy for Reaching the Unreached of 2016-2030
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
WHO	World Health Organization
NDHS	National Demographic Health Survey
NCASC	Nepal Centre for AIDS and STD Control
DoHS	Department of Health Services
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology
GPI	Gender Parity Index
RtoR	Room to Read
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
MoLESS	Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security
CESLAM	The Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility
ILO	International Labour Organization
UAE	United Arab Emirates
DoFE	Department of Foreign Employment

Health Governance

Nepal's Health Sector in 2021 Quarter Three

The end of the first quarter period of 2021 marked a full year since the declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11th 2020. The beginning of the third quarter period thus was characterized by over a year since the now-so-labeled 'first wave' surge of Covid-19 triggered waves of crises including public infection concerns, health systems capacity issues, economic emergencies, and a chaotic nation wide struggle to find, explore, and implement new modalities without prior preparation within the public health sector.

It is not surprising thus, that the Nepali health sector has remained largely occupied primarily with pandemic related concerns throughout 2021 up to the end of the third quarter. The challenge was further escalated during the second quarter of the year as a sudden new surge, now commonly known as the 'second wave' of the Covid-19 spread in Nepal, was noted in early May 2021. Within days of the Ministry of Health and Population acknowledging the new wave of infection, a new set of lockdown-like list of government endorsed prohibitive orders were announced closing the country down again in the midst of some semblance of normalcy returning since 2020. By the middle of July, infection rates had already begun to settle down as the restrictive preventative orders were beginning to become more relaxed and vaccination drives had increased. By the time of this writing, no such official declarations have been made regarding the beginning and end of the second wave, but all prohibitive orders have been lifted and infection rates have settled to pre-second quarter metrics. Additionally, there has been an optimistic sharp rise in the number of news stories covering the procurement of more Covid-19 vaccines to be delivered in October.

Concurrently, the third quarter of 2021 was also characterized with another unfortunate growing trend in the Nepali public health space in the form of the increased footprint of increasing health concerns related to the environment and natural disasters. Just as the first quarter of the year was marked by record wildfires and dangerous levels of hazardous air pollution, the second quarter was marked by more wildfires, policy concerns surrounding the legalization of environmentally disastrous sandmining practices, and heavy floods and landslides causing large scale loss of lives and infrastructure in the Melamchi and surrounding hilly areas. Similarly, the third quarter of the year also saw a continuation of erratic rainfall, especially during and around the peak Monsoon periods. Most notably, the Kathmandu Valley received a record-breaking volume of rain in early September one night causing many citizens in densely packed areas to evacuate their houses in the middle of the night and find shelter in the midst of the pandemic.

Covid-19 Pandemic Trends

Since the aforementioned declaration of the pandemic in March 2020, global trends in cases have been closely monitored and juxtaposed with national trends by a number of different independent sources. However, in the case of Nepal and the larger Indian sub-continent, it makes more sense to view the spikes in Covid-19 occurrences as two distinct, yet mutually overlapping waves of infection, as evidenced by the graphs attached in the following page. As per the most recent communications from the WHO and Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) bodies, the pandemic is still officially ongoing and no timeline has been established to estimate its end.

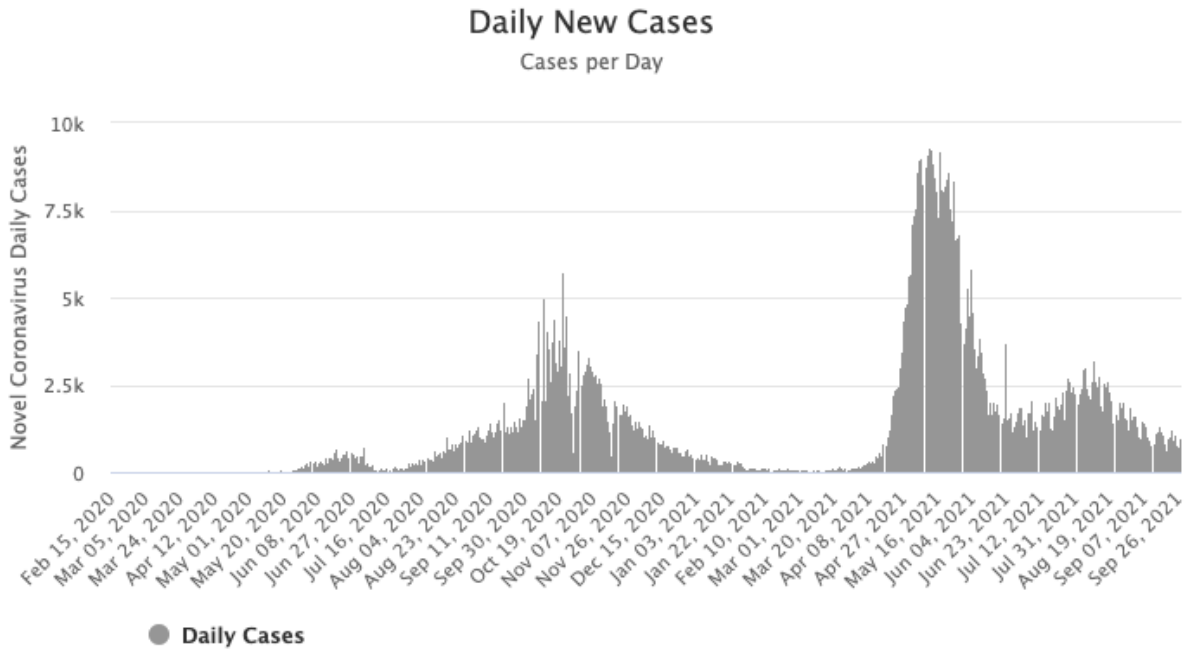


Figure 1: Daily New Confirmed Covid-19 Cases
 Source: WHO, Covid-19 Dashboard

The distinct ‘waves’ of infection are clearly seen in the graphs attached above and below, representing the daily numbers of new Covid-19 cases and deaths caused by Covid-19 respectively. As we can see, the first wave saw a smaller peak around early November 2020, whereas the more pronounced second wave peaked in May to July of 2021. As of this writing, count in new cases and deaths have been decreasing at an accelerating pace, although officially the second wave has not been declared over.

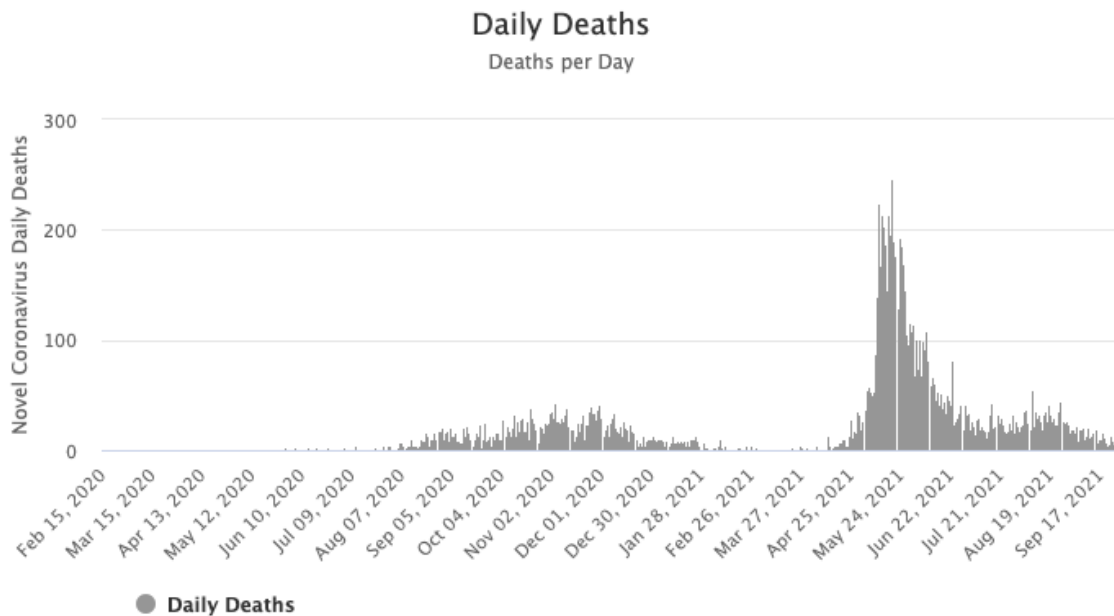


Figure 2: Daily Confirmed Deaths Caused by Covid-19
 Source: WHO, Covid-19 Dashboard

Covid-19 Vaccines

The controversies, criticisms, and frustrations associated with the pandemic have been commensurately reflected in the discourse surrounding the procurement and distribution of the Covid-19 vaccines as well. On January 26th 2021, during the first quarter period of the year, the Government announced the inauguration of the first vaccination drive at Sukraraj Hospital in Teku, Kathmandu. With the same announcement came a target of vaccinating all Nepali citizens within a period of three months, which various public health experts were quick to denounce as being unrealistically ambitious. Since that time, until the writing of this report, there have been waves of vaccination drives performed in reportedly haphazard, unorganized fashion across the country, excluding members of various communities.

The most recent official government communication on the vaccination count comes from the budget announcement speech from quarter two. It was that Nepal has so far administered the first dose of either of the Covid-19 vaccines to 2.11 million people, while another 654,851 people have received both doses, according to the Ministry of Health and Population. Most recent news is optimistic, however, as several news outlets have reported about the likely delivery of two million additional doses of the Covishield vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India by October 2021, of which 1 million was purchased by the Nepal government whereas another million was a grant.

Environmental Public Health Concerns

As of this writing, primary health sector concerns of the year have been largely characterized by environmental issues along with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. In the first quarter, record wildfires were reported, the smokes from which led to an extreme dip in the air quality of various urban centers. During the second quarter, the wildfires continued similarly until the beginning of the Monsoon season, which triggered several floods and landslides in and around the Melamchi river across the districts of Sindhupalchok, Pyuthan, Syangja, and Baglung. Relief efforts and reviews of infrastructure damage came to light at the beginning of the third quarter.

Following these public health crises, on the night of September 5th, the Kathmandu valley received a record-breaking 121.5mm of rain between 1 am and 8:45 am – an unusually high measure even for a 24-hour period. As a result, many areas were inundated within hours by spillover from the swollen Bagmati, including densely packed urban areas such as Balkhu, Balaju, Jamal, and Kuleshwor. Various busy road intersections were also waterlogged for many hours. Experts have predicted that this overnight disaster is likely to have caused a localized spike in Covid-19, along with several other forms of diseases and infections, especially in the informal housing settlements near the Bagmati river.

Key Current Challenges

1. As outlined in the previous quarter, the most pressing challenge in the Nepali public health governance space remains the control of Covid-19 prevention and procurement of vaccines.
2. Due to the rapidly growing number of health concerns triggered by environmental disasters, the government should rethink its health policy with respect to climate change and DRR.
3. With regards to Covid-19, one of the key persistent challenges has remained the efficient, transparent, and updated recordkeeping of new cases, deaths, and rates of change over time.
4. Similarly, effective information dissemination has also remained a key concern as the spread of misinformation and fake news has been a key Covid-19 era challenge in the health sector.

Education Governance

Nepal's Education Sector in 2021 Quarter Three

It is well recorded and acknowledged that education has been one of the hardest hit sectors by the worldwide footprint of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the declaration of the pandemic in 2020, majority of educational institutions around the world have been closed and put in a position to adapt to digital teacher-learning methods irrespective of technological skill, infrastructure, and equipment availability. In Nepal, 2021 has been characterized by much of the same continued, but also amplified among certain geographical areas due to the disproportionate nature of the adverse effects of the pandemic felt in developing countries. Students across the Global South have faced, and continue to face, significantly more educational disruptions than their counterparts in more developed countries due to various systemic causes, including the lack of reliable internet access and technical support. In the Nepali case, the ongoing resurgence of the pandemic's second wave, and the government-imposed restrictions that followed, have resulted in a drastic slump for the year-long progress of students engaged in the formal educational system, particularly in public school under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST).

MoEST had released a document outlining a set of guidelines titled "Framework of School Reopening in the Context of Covid-19" following the first round of lockdowns. The previous quarter-year period was largely characterized by the various start-and-stop processes associated with the application of this document to schools and institutions as they prepared to reopen. However, since its release in November 2020, the document was met with widespread criticism for its rushed nature and lack of comprehensiveness. Amidst various ongoing challenges of hurriedly readjusting the online format to a hasty return to a traditional schooling experience, institutions were once again challenged with another mandated closing following the government's prohibitive orders following the second wave in late April 2021.

Since then, until the time of the writing of this report, the government guidelines have not been significantly altered from official communications, and institutions have slowly begun to plan for another careful round of reopenings. In the urban centers, many private schools and colleges have already long resumed classes in person, while public institutions reopening administration processes have been more haphazard. Several reopening related issues have also come to light during the third quarter of 2021, such as the administration (or lack thereof) of Covid-19 vaccinations, internal evaluation policies discussed during examination periods, and the further widening of vaccine equity in and outside the education sector.

Reopening of Schools Since Covid-19 Disruptions

Throughout the third quarter of 2021, the largest volume of observed trends around education governance in the media, political discourse, and social media tended to revolve around if and how schools around the country, particularly in densely populated urban centers, will resume physical classes since the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This debate was also largely fueled by the fact that vaccinations against Covid-19 has not yet been able to reach most school children below the age of 16. Thus, the threat of virus transmission within school premises remains high among students, teachers, administrators, school staff, and parents despite many adults already receiving at least one dose of the vaccine.



Figure 3: School Reopening Processes Muddled in Ambiguity
Picture Credit: Sulav Shrestha; Nepal24Hours.com

In Nepal, close to 8.5 million students are currently facing a muddle of uncertainties as school sessions have been paused, resumed, or cancelled over the span of the past year and half, since the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic. Poor implementation and monitoring of the government set "Framework of School Reopening in the Context of Covid-19" that was administered to schools and local authorities in November 2020, weak crisis coping mechanisms of local bodies, and sporadic and haphazard announcements of school session resumption or closure continue to create ambiguity among students, teachers, and parents.

While a clear majority of local government units in Nepal are still hotly debating on the modalities, timeframes, and declarations of necessary protocols on the resuming of physical school sessions, various private and public schools in Kathmandu are already gearing up for reopening. Despite serious apprehensions from medical experts and parents, Kathmandu Valley authorities have announced that schools are now allowed to reopen as long as they gain all the required permissions from the relevant local units and the designated District Covid-19 Crisis Management Center. The significant involvement of the local government tier in this case is a direct result of the federal framework introduced by the 2015 constitution promulgation declaring public school-level education to fall under the jurisdiction of the local units.

Alternative Teaching-Learning Methods

One of the most notable shifts observed the world over brought upon by the Covid-19 pandemic has been the digitalization of education. Nepal has been no exception on these grounds, as citizens across the country have had to quickly adapt to previously unused digital means as an education delivery medium.

The widespread implementation of digital teaching-learning methods was initiated with the hope of resolution late last year in 2020. However, as it stands, many students are still struggling to acquaint themselves with the shift in modality due to issues of disproportionate access to technological resources, skills, and training. Moreover, students from marginalized groups situated in remote areas are facing relatively even more severe aftermaths of the pandemic, both in terms of education disruptions as well as health concerns arising from the unavailability of the Covid-19 vaccines, resulting in higher risks of academic dropouts.

Yet, despite the reported ineffectiveness of the adaptation into the digital learning methods highlighted above, it should be noted that the Centre for Education and Human Resource Development under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) has developed guidelines for another alternative learning method for homeschooling children. The concept aims to assign elders or educated members of the family to take up the responsibility of educating their children at home, using curricula based guidelines designed and disseminated by the ministry. While on one hand, schools and colleges are hastening towards resuming physical classes, especially in urban areas, the guidelines being shared for

homeschool to keep students progressing with their education at home are being further discussed. While the official adaptation of the homeschooling guidelines has not yet taken place, parents and guardians have been hopeful to take advantage of the program soon in order to continue students' education safely.

Covid-19 Vaccines for Students

As part of the national vaccination drive against the Covid-19 virus, the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) has directed concerned authorities to immunize all university level students above the age of 18, aiming to safeguard the health and safety of all students and teachers, professors, university staff, and administrators that are mandated to physically appear for examinations.

The vaccination decisions were announced in early August this year following large-scale outrage and protests led by various joint student organizations against compulsion for in-person examinations amidst the threats of the ongoing pandemic when many students were not yet vaccinated. Wary of an impending Covid-19 outbreak among students and staff just a few weeks after the settling of the Covid-19 second wave, the government extended vaccinations to reach grade 12 students who were also mandated to appear for in-person examinations. Eligibility for the vaccines were determined by the students' examination admittance card, unfortunately leaving behind students who were not yet enrolled in schools or dropped out since the beginning of the pandemic.

This complication in the administration of the vaccines and the exclusivity it caused went on to create widespread critique, similar to the outrage observed last quarter targeting the internal examination evaluation debate, which was reported to have been exploited by various institutions to inflate their students' grades. While the health and safety of students at schools and colleges has remained a subject of grave concern since the onset of the pandemic last year, immunizing them against Covid-19 is only being discussed in the past few months. Publicly acknowledged dissatisfaction in the handling of the pandemic disruptions suggest that the debates on the reopening of schools could have been eased if the government had focused on vaccinating students and teachers earlier across the country.

Key Current Challenges

1. Improper implementation and monitoring of the Covid-19 safety protocols in schools and colleges before and after reopening remains the most pressing challenge as many institutions begin to ready themselves for opening.
 2. Vaccination drives should include marginalized students, students who are not enrolled in schools or may have dropped since the onset of the pandemic due a financial or social reasons.
 3. Alternate teaching-learning methods and internal evaluation systems need vigorous analysis of the needs of students, teachers, and parents/guardians to develop a robust framework that can be considered comparable to curricula being used before the pandemic.
 4. Teachers and school staff should also be prioritized along with students for Covid-19 vaccinations.
 5. Prominent communication gap among the three tiers of education governance regarding school reopening, exams announcement and vaccination drives must be addressed. Additionally, jurisdiction delineation needs to be established between the three tiers for other Covid-19 related measures that can affect the education sectors, such as lockdowns and prohibitive measures.
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Migration Governance

Nepal's Migration Sector in 2021 Quarter Three

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic continues to pose a significant threat to the promotion of a safer, more secure, better migration governance framework in Nepal. During the third quarter period of 2021, the Government of Nepal faced numerous challenges to foster better migration management, most notably with respect to new mandatory development of migration policies adopted by several host countries.

Firstly, capability limitations and ad-hoc decisions regarding vaccinations, in addition to several bureaucratic hassles in obtaining vaccine certification distorted the immediate migration plans of thousands of migrant workers whereas online applications for receiving QR-coded vaccination certificate were reportedly difficult for aspirants who are uneducated and not technologically savvy. Secondly, the ongoing complications caused by international closure of universities, training centers, and institutions of study contributed to create uncertainty for Nepali student migration. As per the most recently published data by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST), more than ten thousand students who have received the “No Objection Letter” are stranded in Nepal due to various international lockdowns. Thirdly, the repatriation of undocumented workers at the time of the high-profile political developments in Afghanistan and dead bodies of labour migrants from various destination countries have shone a light on the emergency policies that need to be set in place for effective migration governance in the future. With this regard, Nepal needs to build cordial relationships with host countries and enhance collaborative approaches among the meso and micro-structures of international bi/multilateral partnerships to ensure effective migration governance.

International Migration at a Glance

During the third quarter of 2021, a total 31,528 aspiring migrants began processing the necessary registrations for international migration. However, there has been an observed gradual decline in the number of departures in comparison to the commensurate number of arrivals within this time period. The participation of male migrations for a significant decrease in the relative numbers of migrants relative to female aspirants, as shown in the figures attached below. Likewise, student migration has also been found to be disrupted much more significantly by the pandemic.

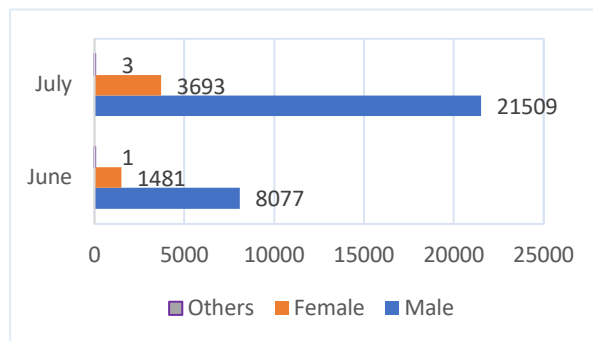


Figure 5: International Migration Trends: Arrivals
Source: DOI

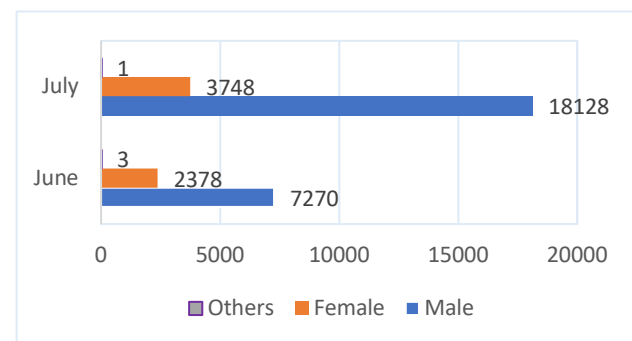


Figure 4: International Migration Trends: Departures
Source: DOI

Foreign Employment

According to the Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE), the flow of returnee migrants among those seeking foreign employment were observed to be higher in Qatar, South Arabia, and the UAE, accounting for 54915, 46960, and 40477 migrants respectively despite the challenges posed by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than focusing on the push-pull model, experts have presumed that the existing poor socio-economic opportunities, unsatisfied and non-secure reintegration measures are chosen to reenter the international workforce sooner than anticipated.

Irrespective of the underlying mechanism behind it, migrant workers did suffer greatly due to ad-hoc decisions made for inoculation against Covid-19, and went to several difficulties in obtaining the necessary QR-coded verifications needed to complete their journeys. Moreover, limited facilitation from the recruiting agency was also noted by several experts and media personnel, showing an elevated risk of unregulated migration. It is speculated that this might have been caused by the dissatisfaction felt by aspiring migrants towards recruiting agencies based on new directive rules endorsed by the Nepal government.

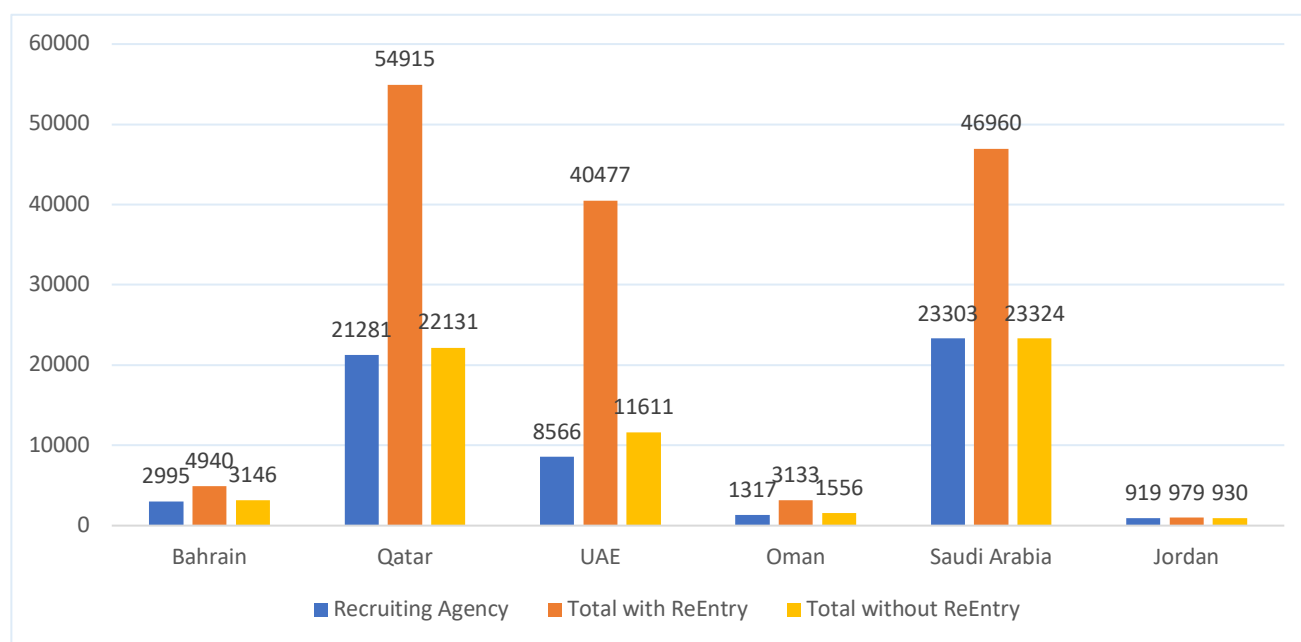


Figure 6: Labour Approvals for FY 2077/78 BS
Source: department of Foreign Employment

Issues of Agency and Identity

Classical migration theory within social science disciplines suggests that aspiring migrants who have strong financial capability are generally in a position in which they have agency in the decision to opt for migration. However, several instances of direct and indirect forms of forced migration is still observed in Nepal. Meso structures such as migration network strength, migration community, and industry have long played key roles in defining migration processes and pathways determination among aspirants in the country.

Studies have shown that young aspirants, particularly, are generally influenced by such structures and thus tend to seek financial loans to see through their migration plans, often resulting in debt bondage and economic crises. On the other hand, ethnic marginalization in direct and more indirect, systemically enforced ways, can also play a role in determining migration decisions. Cases of communal fracture, which can be triggered by a number of different reasons such as racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and exclusion are often reasons cited in theory and in practice. In the case of Nepal, environmental crises, which are becoming exacerbated due to the compounding effects of climate change, and natural disasters have also historically been key migration triggers affecting communities of all socio-economic standings.

Emerging Destinations for Foreign Employment

Given recent history, countries from the Gul Cooperation Council (GCC) have been the most popular destination countries by volume for migration by a wide margin. However, a growing trend observes an increase in interest to move to European countries, Japan, and Afghanistan for foreign employment.

According to the most recently published data from the Department of Foreign Employment, Romania is the first choice where approximately 2099 labour migrants opted to migrate to, followed closely by Japan with a respective 2079 cases. Unfortunately, due to a lack of an effective monitoring mechanism used to regulate the systemic migration processes in these countries, the effectiveness of the underlying economic cost and benefit is unknown. When Afghanistan went through a sudden political change during the third quarter of 2021, the issue of undocumented migrants was thus heightened overnight, and recordkeeping weaknesses were highlighted in making repatriation plans. An estimated 1073 aspirant migrants had received labour approvals for working in Afghanistan. During the political crisis, around 504 Nepali labour migrants were rescued by the Nepal government whereas 398 registered their whereabouts in the online government portal themselves.

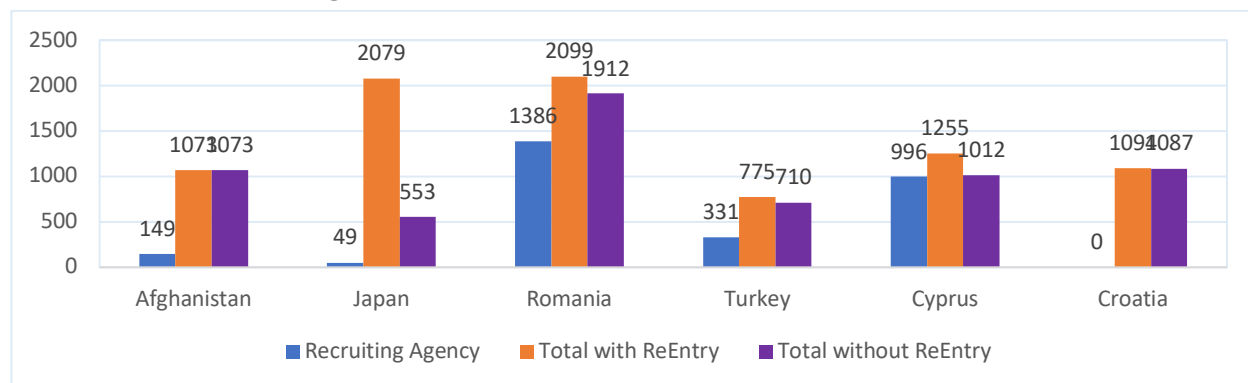


Figure 7: Labour Approvals for FY 2077/78, Source: DoFE

Key Current Challenges

1. Absence of accurate disaggregated data on migrants and poor monitoring processes.
2. Increasing polarization of labour diplomacy practices with destination countries based on political standing, causing disruption of sage migration and repatriation processes.
3. A lack of systematic skill development and training programs for aspiring migrants, especially in the digital space.
4. Poor enforcement of labour laws and redressal mechanisms violating the rights of migrants abroad.

References

Governance Monitoring Centre Nepal works with and/or relies on a number of partner organizations, open data sources, government and quasi-government institution reports, policy-briefs, multi-lateral organization reports, and mainstream/independent media houses – including digital, print, and audio/video content producing publications for information.

GMC Nepal is grateful to the following organizations for making datasets, analyses, reports, and information available for use for this publication.

1. Constitution of Nepal
2. National Planning Commission
3. National Law Commission

Health Governance:

4. Ministry of Health and Population
5. Kantipur Daily
6. World Health Organization
7. Centre for Disease Control (Washington DC, USA)
8. World-O-Meter

Education Governance:

1. Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology
2. The Kathmandu Post
3. United Nations Childrens' Fund
4. The Himalayan Times
5. United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

Migration Governance:

6. Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security
7. Department of Foreign Employment
8. Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility
9. The Rising Nepal

Credits & Acknowledgements

This document is the product of work done by a number of members of the Centre for Social Change (CSC) team in various capacities. The facts, graphs/charts, statistical information and data presented in this report were sourced and compiled by various members of the Governance Monitoring Centre Nepal team. Organizations and specific reports from which secondary data has been sourced have been credited accordingly throughout the pages of this document. GMC Nepal would like to extend gratitude towards all individuals and organizations who, formally and informally, have contributed to the compilation and distribution of this report.

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